

Cleaning Up the Portland Harbor Superfund Site

Portland Harbor Partnership

The Willamette River plays a critical role in the environmental, economic, cultural and recreational life of Oregon. For centuries the river has served millions of users, and this continuous use has taken a toll on the river's condition. One particular segment of the Willamette near downtown Portland is polluted, and over the coming years hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent cleaning it up. Here is information on what's happening, why it's happening, and how you can help make sure community goals are met during the cleanup.

What is a Superfund Site?

In 1980 Congress passed a law directing the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to manage the cleanup of sites across the U.S. contaminated by hazardous substances. These sites can be as small as single household properties or as large as entire counties. The sites are referred to as "Superfund" sites because a tax-funded government account referred to as the Superfund once was available to the EPA to pay for cleanups. Today the Superfund largely is dry, and the EPA finds alternative ways to finance cleanups.

What is Portland Harbor?

Portland Harbor is the industrial area of the lower Willamette River north of downtown Portland from the Broadway bridge up to the Columbia River. Often called the "working harbor," Portland Harbor is Oregon's largest seaport, linking a deepwater channel with rail lines, pipelines and highways. The 50 businesses with direct harbor access provide nearly 20,000 jobs with an average wage of \$47,000 (higher than the Portland average household income of \$41,000). Other indirect jobs support the harbor-related businesses.

The Portland Harbor is not exclusively industrial. The harbor includes or is adjacent to parks, agricultural land and open spaces including Sauvie Island and Kelley Point Park. The area is used for a variety of recreational activities, including boating, fishing, biking, hiking, picnicking, and bird watching. Hundreds of plant and animal species rely on the waters and lands of the lower Willamette River for their health and wellbeing.

What is the Portland Harbor Superfund Site?

In 2000 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated a segment of the lower Willamette River a Superfund site. The Superfund Site is a ten-mile segment of Portland Harbor on the Willamette River from Sauvie Island at river mile 1.9 to the Broadway Bridge in downtown Portland at river mile 11.8.

The pollution stems from multiple sources from over a hundred years of activity and over one hundred potentially responsible parties. Sources include industrial activities, agricultural and urban development, wartime activities like ship building and scrapping, sewer overflows and storm-water discharges.

Who pays for the clean up of Superfund Sites?

Under Superfund EPA designates Potentially Responsible Parties (PRP). A PRP is any person, company or public entity that owns property in a contaminated site or may have had some part in polluting a site. PRPs are responsible for funding or conducting a study of contamination, developing a plan to cleanup the contamination, and ultimately paying for the cleanup, all under the direction of EPA. Because the Superfund largely is dry, EPA relies on the PRPs who are still around to pay for the cleanups.

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What is the timeline for the Portland Harbor Superfund cleanup?

There are six general phases in the Superfund cleanup process.

Preliminary Assessment – EPA investigates a site and determines whether further studies are necessary. EPA completed this for Portland Harbor and designated it a Superfund Site in 2000.

Remedial Investigation – EPA or its designee investigates the nature and extent of contamination. This phase culminates with a formal assessment of current risks at the site. This assessment was submitted to EPA in fall 2009 and is being finalized this year.

Feasibility Study – EPA or its designee evaluates available cleanup options. The draft feasibility study is scheduled for submittal to EPA in November 2011.

Proposed Plan – Once the studies are complete, EPA prepares a preliminary choice of a cleanup option and seeks public input on that plan.

Record of Decision – After public comment is received, EPA sets a final cleanup plan.

Cleanup – EPA may do the cleanup itself, make an agreement with others to do the cleanup, or order responsible parties to do the cleanup.

Who is conducting the studies?

The Lower Willamette Group (LWG) signed an agreement with EPA in 2001 to prepare the Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study under EPA's direction. The LWG includes the City of Portland, the Port of Portland, NW Natural, and eleven private companies. The group is a small subset of the potentially responsible parties identified by EPA. The group has spent over \$85 million on the studies to date. EPA has not yet determined who will pay for the cleanup.

What are the human health risks?

The most significant public health risk is from eating resident fish caught within the Superfund Site. Resident fish are bass, carp and catfish, but do not include salmon and steelhead. In 2004, the Oregon Health Department issued a fish advisory warning children and pregnant women to avoid these fish and recommended that others limit consumption to one meal each month. In 2010, the Oregon Health Department determined that the chemical pollution does not limit recreational uses of the river. That is, it is safe to swim in the river unless there has been a recent sewage overflow event due to bacterial contamination.

How can I help?

The Portland Harbor Partnership (PHP) is a new group created solely to ensure a broad community outreach effort during the Portland Harbor Superfund process. PHP shares EPA's desire to engage a wide spectrum of Oregonians in the decisions that affect the Willamette River's future. The decisions made about the Portland Harbor and the Willamette River will leave a legacy for generations to follow. We want to be proud of that legacy.

Portland Harbor Partners include the Port of Portland, the Oregon Division of State Lands, Calbag Metals, Evraz Industries, Gunderson LLC, NW Natural, Schnitzer Steel, and Vigor Industrial. The PHP effort is working in cooperation with Portland State University Hatfield School of Government and Oregon State University Extension Service.

The future of the Portland Harbor will be shaped by the Superfund cleanup. PHP wants your input on how this process should take place. Join PHP at an **upcoming event** or **contact PHP** to share your vision for the Portland Harbor.

For more information, please visit
www.PortlandHarborPartnership.com